ELIJAH POAGE AND HIS MILL

The Poage Family Built A Community When Roanoke Was Still The Great Lick Crossroad

All that development up toward Bent Mountain along U.S. 221 is taking place on land that was once the site of Indian footraces. Later, the Poage family established a mill and several other businesses. The history of the Back Creek area provides a fascinating look at the valley's early development.

BY HELEN BARRANGER

Talk about environmental impact statements.

Elijah Poage was 24 years old in 1848—just 10 years after Roanoke County had been formed from the far western part of Augusta County—when he appeared at the Salem Courthouse to apply for permission to erect a 12-foot dam. He owned land on both sides of Back Creek, he said, and he wanted to operate a grist and sawmill.

The Court ordered that a writ of *Ad Quod Dammum* ("To What Damage") be issued, directing the Roanoke County Sheriff to "summon and impannel 12 fit persons" who were impartial to meet upon the land to "judge to the best of their skill and ability, from above and below the proposed dam, whether the property of others might be damaged."

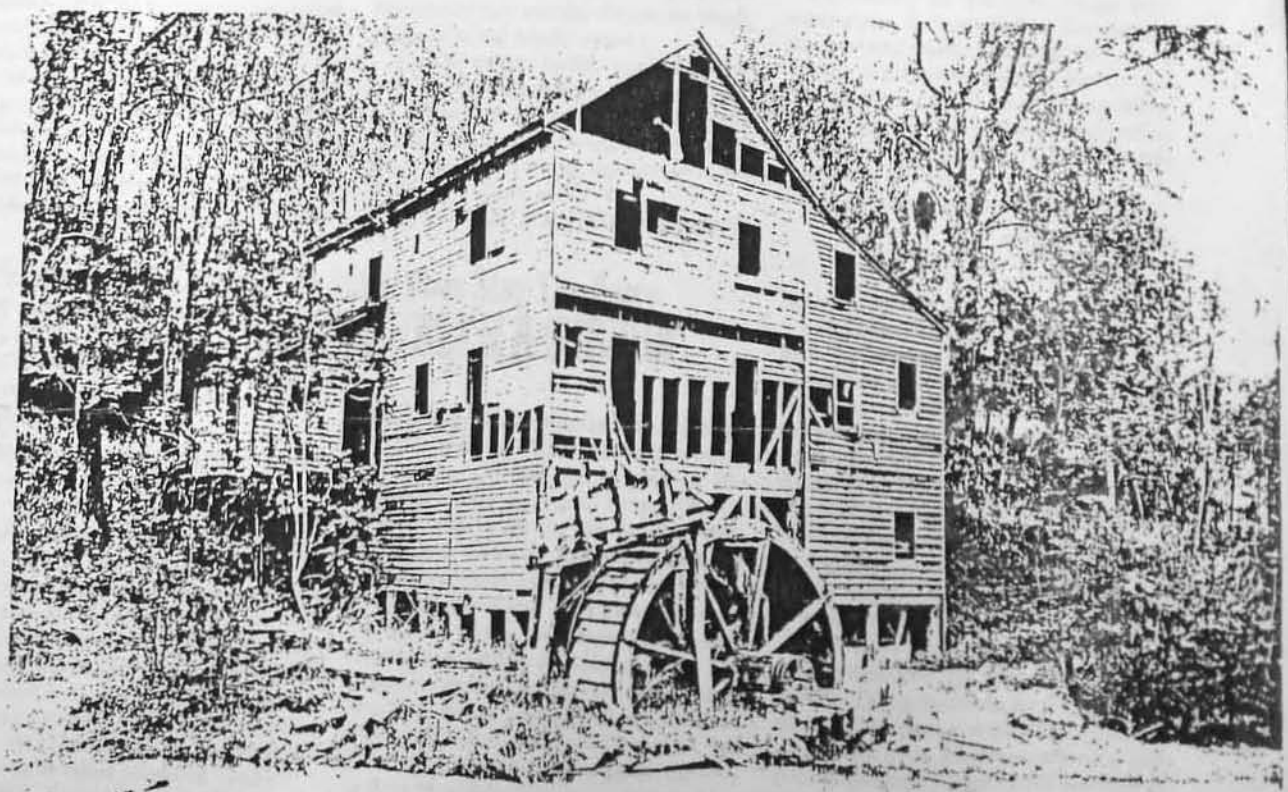
The jurors were also to determine whether, and in what degree, "fish of passage and ordinary navigation" might be obstructed; whether such obstruction could be prevented; and whether the health of Poage's neighbors would be "annoyed" by the stagnation of the water.

Maybe that's where the Army Corps of Engineers got its tone.

In June of 1848, the Court ordered that Elijah Poage "have leave to build the said mill and dam."

So began a Roanoke County community in the valley at the base of Mason's Knob whose name exists today even though Poage's Mill is long gone.

Elijah lived half a mile east of the dam site, in a log cabin that had been built in



A proud mill in decline. Poage's Mill, built in the 1840s and the focal point of the Back Creek area through the rest of the 19th century, had fallen into disrepair by the early 1900s.

he appeared at the Salem Courthouse to apply for permission to erect a 12-foot dam. He owned land on both sides of Back Creek, he said, and he wanted to operate a grist and sawmill.

The Court ordered that a writ of *Ad Quod Dammum* ("To What Damage") be issued, directing the Roanoke County Sheriff to "summon and impannel 12 fit persons" who were impartial to meet upon the land to "judge to the best of their skill and ability, from above and below the proposed dam, whether the property of others

Publisher — Page 1139 The Descendants of Rob...

Squire Elijah Poage.
He was also a furniture and cabinet maker.

Mary Poage Gregson with Elijah Poage's journal.
"If he had any faults, I never heard of them."

1833 by his father, John. Settlers passed along the dirt road on their way over Bent Mountain to the Southwest Carolina Road. Ox-drawn wagons, men on horseback and on foot, traveled on their way from the mountain top to the nearest trading post at Lynchburg, transporting homegrown products to exchange for sugar, salt, coffee, tea and dress goods. The Poage land, about a day's trip from the Floyd area, was one of several Back Creek campgrounds. Legend says that Poage's flat bottomland had been an Indian campground and also a footrace track for Indians. An occasional arrowhead is still found.

When Poage constructed his mill in 1848, present-day Roanoke was a scattering of buildings at the Great Lick crossroad, surrounded by large farms. Some lots had been sold for New Antwerp, a town which never materialized. The Town of Big Lick, a one-square-mile group of 20 or so buildings and several small tobacco processing factories, was not chartered until 1874. Eight years later the name Big Lick was changed to Roanoke when the latter was chartered.

In 1840, Roanoke County had a population of 5,000 and was 70 percent forested. There were 450 people in Salem. Vinton was Gish's Mill. The years between the founding of Roanoke County and the Civil War were peaceful and prosperous for the Back Creek settlers. Elijah Poage prospered, too.

There were other corn mills in the county, but Elijah's was the only mill which could also grind wheat. He was quick to abandon the old "sash" sawmill (a reciprocating blade similar to a cross-cut saw, except powered by water rather than men) in favor of the newly invented, more efficient circular saw. One history says that his circular saw was the first in the south, perhaps in the whole country.

Soon he added a furniture and coffin factory. He developed an embalming fluid, the first in the area, and added a mortuary. At his death in 1900, Poage owned one of the oldest undertaking businesses in the country in length of service.

For nearly 50 years Elijah Poage made coffins and caskets. A coffin was a simple wood box, often of pine. A casket was fancier. Many were of black walnut, lined with fabric; some had silver handles.

Fortunately for posterity, Poage kept meticulous records. Almost everyone in the area had an account at the mill.

"He never owed anybody money, but everybody owed him money," says Mary Poage Gregson, a descendant who lives on land that once belonged to Elijah. She has one of his journals.

"As children, we all played with it," she

continued on page 48

The More Things Change The More They Stay The Same

THE BACK CREEK AREA HAS BEEN A SUBURB SINCE THE EARLY 1900s

The Back Creek community was "an extension or suburb of the Great Lick settlement," wrote F.B. Kegley in his 1938 "Virginia Frontier." Driving out to Poage's Mill during the first half of this century was a popular thing to do. The whole community turned out to stare and be amazed when Tish Fishburn in 1902 drove his new automobile, Roanoke's first, out to Poage's Mill to show it off. Raymond Barnes' Roanoke history records a big city-county picnic there in 1920 which was "attended by a multitude to boost improved roads."

In 1960, Barnes wrote: "Today it (Poage's Mill) is no longer a delightful rural retreat where Roanokers can go in summer to enjoy a bit of farm life, among people who are friendly, hospitable, invariably kind-hearted. Some really magnificent homes are now found where apple trees formerly flourished and the picturesque dusty road of yesterday is now a modern speedway. This pleasant community has lost its rural aspect and is fast becoming a suburb of Roanoke."

Barnes should see the area now. Since he wrote, at least a baker's dozen subdivisions have been developed between the Cave Spring High School area and the foot of Bent Mountain. Expensive homes, hidden by trees, nestle into the hilly terrain, so concealed that a casual passer-by would never guess they are there.

Arlington Hills, Scenic Hills and Old Mill Forest were some of the first, dating to the '60s and '70s. Fort Mason, Poage Mill Estates, Falcon Ridge, Bridlewood, Countrywood and Holly Ridge developments appeared in the '70s. The '80s produced Highfields, Vista Forest, Forest Edge, Higginbotham Farms and Carriage Hills. Most of the homes sit high. Many have glimpses of the Blue Ridge Parkway to the south, magnificent views of the mountains all around.

The state highway department is rumored to have had road improvements for U.S. 221 on the books for 20 years. And the current plan is to dust off the plans and get to work on it. Maybe another big city-county picnic at Poage's Mill attended by a multitude to boost improved roads would spur them on.

—HB

recorded mill transactions, sale of ment, what took place in his mortuary and coffin business, often with notations giving age of the deceased and cause of death. Unwittingly, he left a valuable social commentary about the lives and times of 19th century residents of Roanoke County. Examples:

1860 Aug. 6 — To Chapman T. Hourley, To coffin for child age 7 mos. $3.50

Oct. 2 — Jacob Shaver Dr. (directed) to E. Poage To 1 coffin for child, aged 2 years. Died with Scarlotte Fever $5.75

1861 July 16 — To Joshua Nabors, Coffin for his little son aged 3 years. Died from Fluxe and worms $4.00

July 14 — Coffin for little daughter, aged 5 years. Same disease as brother $4.25

A quart of brandy brought in 25 cents, a bushel of corn, 75 cents. Recorded is $4.50 charged "To season a mare;" the sum paid out for "9 days work at 75 cents a day."

Poage never owned slaves; there were black families in the neighborhood who hired out by the day.

Inserted in the front of Gregson's journal is a section from another book that sets forth tables of measurement of all kinds, even including apothecary weights. There are pages and pages of "Application of Problems," handwritten in careful, decorative script.

Bill Joyce, a Back Creek resident who collects stories and history of Back Creek families, thinks it is part of a book of instruction, quite possibly passed down to Elijah through several generations, for the monetary units are in British pounds (L), shillings (s) and pence (d). The problems are practical, concerning such things as linen, coffee, and land. Examples:

A man sold 3 yards of muslin for 3L 9s

years, tall, slender and bearded. He was born in Rockbridge County in 1823, coming to Back Creek as a young man. When he was 14 his father died.

It is not recorded where he went to school or for how long. He had a bright mind, was quick to recognize an opportunity and seize it. He had special gifts for mathematics and record-keeping; aptitudes for fine craftsmanship; mechanical abilities; an enterprising, entrepreneurial spirit. From dawn until dark an ambition to excel drove him to hard work that would have finished off a lesser man.

"Everyone said he was a wonderful person," Gregson says. "If he had any faults, I never heard of them."

Most of Elijah's traits and characteristics must have come to him honestly through the genes and family living patterns of his forebears.

Poages are well documented in Virginia history. F.B. Kegley, in his 1938 "Virginia Frontier," writes: "Poage families are closely identified with every advance made by Virginia's western frontier."

In 1793, Robert Poage and his wife Elizabeth Preston Poage, Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, emigrated with nine children from Ireland to Augusta County. Robert sold the land upon which the Augusta Stone Church was built at Fort Defiance near Staunton.

In the 1750s the church ordered a silver communion set from England. After months of waiting for it to be crafted, shipped across the Atlantic, then transported overland from Newcastle, Del., it finally arrived—an exquisitely made group of three pitchers, three plates, six goblets, each with its own stand. The church officers looked at the invoice in dismay; there was no way their little congregation could afford such expense. The group met and decided it must be returned.

Elijah and Mary had been known for in the 19th century. Miss Mollie ran a sort of mini-resort after the turn of the century. It began when young cousins who worked in town would come out for the weekend, bringing friends. The reputation for pleasant country living spread until folks came "from all over the east" to square dance to music from a player piano, play croquet on the lawn, take moonlight strolls, but mainly to partake of Miss Mollie's wonderful country cooking.

"Grandma always had pies," says Mary Poage Gregson. "She would bake four or five at a time in a big stone outdoor Dutch

and fed houseguests, reared seven children, wove carpets for every room in the house, tended a big garden while she wore her slat bonnet.

"She would put on a big kettle of beans and then go to the garden and hoe a row or two while the beans cooked," says Gregson.

Miss Mollie milked eight cows, churned butter, raised chickens, canned for the winter, made and mended clothes, even kept 16 or 18 geese, one named Lucy who was about 20 years old. She shopped in Roanoke for the few items she could not grow or make. —HB

Southwest Virginia. Eventually he moved to Back Creek.

Several early Poages were justices of the peace, bearing the title of squire. They were road commissioners and surveyors. Joan Poage, a son of Robert and father of Elijah, was elected to the assembly in 1777. The Poages have always been well connected. Colonel Robert Breckinridge married Mary Poage; General Andrew Lewis married Martha. In modern times, the mother of former Sixth District Congressman Caldwell Butler was a Poage.

At the age of 44, in 1867, Elijah married Mary M. Sloan, a woman from the community. About that time he was elected a justice of the peace for the Cave Spring District; thereafter he was called Squire Poage. He was continuously re-elected as long as he lived.

Elijah donated land along the present Route 221 for a school or a church, the land where Poage's Mill Brethren Church

wagons; 13 stands of bees; 1,000 pounds of bacon; 20 coffins; 6,000 feet of walnut, cherry, pine, poplar and oak lumber; household and kitchen furniture.

Exactly when the mill ceased to operate is uncertain. A Mr. Siner leased it briefly. Then George Hunt let his brother-in-law run the mill and store under the name Obediah Hunt & Sons.

"My mother came to Back Creek in 1906 to teach and it was not running then," says Gregson. "I remember the night the dam broke, about 1918 or 20. There was a heavy electrical storm that took out the swinging bridge. Back Creek came up over the road."

Gradually the mill building and wheel sank into decay. Vandals took their toll.

In the family cemetery, designated a historic landmark, Elijah and Mary are buried high on a hill overlooking their lands. Nearby are the graves of his parents. Sometime along the way, Elijah set the